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SUBJECT: RENEWED OBAMA FEVER GRIPS BAHAMAS

REF: 08 NASSAU 776

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Bahamian public and press greeted the inauguration of President Obama with unbridled enthusiasm, reveling in the historic nature of the occasion which transcended social, religious, and political lines. All major media outlets sent teams of journalists to Washington to cover inaugural events, some doing live coverage. The state broadcasting network conducted a "Bahama for Obama DC Tour", including youth representatives from both major political parties, to produce TV and radio features. Ordinary people, commentators, and politicians of all stripes expressed effusive praise for the U.S. democratic process and optimism about future policies. Enthusiasm reigned despite the U.S. economic downturn which has hit the Bahamian tourist industry hard, and fears previously expressed about potential impacts of Obama administration policies affecting the off-shore financial sector (the second most important industry after tourism). Many viewed the inauguration as a vindication of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of racial equality in the U.S. Some, particularly those favorable to the governing party, also saw it as a lesson in political 'color-blindness' for Bahamians to emulate in the future, albeit in reverse. Inauguration fever provided a spike to the post-November 5 public diplomacy bonanza. END SUMMARY.

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INAUGURATION RIVETS BAHAMAS  
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¶2. (U) The U.S. presidential inauguration was the talk of The Bahamas. Ordinary business ground to a halt as Bahamians, just as on election night, gathered around television sets in homes, bars, and restaurants to watch and cheer the proceedings. Cable news commentary blared from cafes on the downtown tourist strip in a scene more reminiscent of international sporting events. As they have for months, T-shirt sellers hawked a variety of Obama inauguration-inspired wares, including the signature "Bahama for Obama" paraphernalia. Primary and secondary schoolchildren in a number of public and private schools gathered in assemblies to watch live TV coverage. Media coverage was heavy and all-pervasive, including front-page newspaper headlines, full page photo spreads, and in one broadsheet the full text of the inauguration speech. Many editorialists drew lessons for Bahamian politics, as they did in the wake of the election outcome. The co-host of a popular radio morning program, like many other Bahamians and journalists, traveled to Washington to witness the moment personally.

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UNITES POLITICIANS, PREACHERS, AND PEOPLE  
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¶3. (U) Bahamians from across the political and social spectrum hailed President Obama as a paragon of African-American success and a redemptive figure who triumphed not only over personal obstacles but the historic injustices of racism and slavery, which is also inextricably linked to colonialism in the Caribbean. Bahamians viewed the inauguration of President Obama as a testament to the strength of American democracy. In the avowedly Christian

and extremely socially conservative Bahamas, notably, even preachers celebrated the historic victory over negative historical legacies without regard to cultural or religious concerns, such as gay rights. Referencing a prominent pastor's emotional commentary, one reporter referred to the inauguration as a "symbol of mental emancipation", in a turn of phrase that evoked Abraham Lincoln and Bob Marley simultaneously. An editorial in a daily newspaper assessed the significance of the Obama story for race relations in the U.S. and concluded it was a lesson in political color-blindness, for black Bahamians to emulate in the future, echoing sentiments expressed by a variety of commentators since the election resulting in a fair bit of media controversy. COMMENT: The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Brent Symonette, is a white Bahamian from a prominent political and business family whose name is often mentioned as a potential successor to the Prime Minister, Hubert Ingraham. END COMMENT.

¶4. (U) In the wake of the inauguration of the first African-American president of the U.S., calculations of national interest took a back seat to history and partisanship was set aside. A leading opposition politician set up TV screens to allow a primary school audience in his constituency to view the swearing-in, while a government MP aired a political spot on radio associating the Obama inauguration with his own win in a court-ordered recount one year ago. Ordinary Bahamians also joined the bandwagon. Some congratulated Embassy staff spontaneously, the illegal numbers racket (reportedly) did a brisk business in Obama-associated combinations, and downtown vendors hoped the Obama enthusiasm would give their souvenir sales a prolonged

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lift. Bahamians followed the recent U.S. election cycle more intensely and closely than any in memory due to the candidacy of an African-American, with the vast majority supporting Barack Obama (reftel).

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PRESS REACTION OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE  
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¶5. (U) Broadcast networks covered the inauguration fully, and media carried overwhelmingly positive views of the inauguration of President Obama and the U.S. as a whole:

--The Tribune daily (circulation 15,000) front-page November 21 read "Bahamians celebrate as Obama makes history" and was followed by three full pages of coverage, with a U.S. commentary in place of an editorial.

--The Nassau Guardian daily (circulation 15,000), in addition to front-page coverage and a photospread, ran a story on grass-roots reactions titled "Bahamians Proud of United States" and quoted a well-known pastor and motivational speaker at length, "Munroe: Obama A Symbol of Mental Emancipation". An article in the business section, "Obama too busy to talk tax?", quoted a former finance minister who speculated that there would likely be no short-term pressure "to toughen American tax laws" targeting offshore financial centers, as some Bahamians had feared in the run-up to the election.

-- The Bahama Journal daily's (circulation 7,500) ran several stories, one quoting ordinary people and youth, titled "Bahamians Moved By Change".

ZUNIGA-BROWN